

LOCAL POWER IN BRITAIN AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

John Garrard

University of Salford

OCCASIONAL PAPER IN POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY NO. 29

ISBN NO. 1 870365 41 0

LOCAL POWER IN BRITAIN AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

John Garrard
University of Salford

The paper below was written for the October 1991 Conference of the European Science Foundation in Espinho, Portugal. The theme of the Conference was the Future of the European City and the paper was located in a session on "decentralization, local autonomy and urban government". It was an attempt to provide participants with a sense of historical perspective so far as British urban society and politics were concerned. At a time when urban areas and their governmental institutions are undergoing rapid, accelerating and even enforced change, it seemed useful to more precisely measure the speed and direction of that change by locating it by reference to its past. At a time also when there are many plans for the decentralization of governmental power in European countries, it appeared worthwhile to try to provide some insight into what this might entail, at least in a negative sense, by examining British local government and society at a point in the past when both were relatively uncentralised.

* * * * *

In this paper, I want to try to compose a picture of the power structure of the town and city at the turn of the century by comparing it both with its future and its past - to discover both how different that structure is from that of the late twentieth century, and how much it had changed as compared with the situation evident in earlier decades. In other words, I want to measure how far urban areas around 1900 are from our own time, how far they have come, and at what speed they were travelling. It will become evident that the picture changes according to whether one directs the spotlight on the late-nineteenth century city from our present or its past. We shall also discover that the local power structure in 1900 can only be understood by reference to the changing social and economic basis upon which it rested.

Let us start, however, with three assorted words of warning. Firstly, in research terms, I know more about towns than cities; more about the urban areas of northern England than those of the south, the midlands or Scotland; and at this stage in my research, more about how the central-local power situation looked from the standpoint of the locality than from the centre.

Secondly, viewing it from the standpoint of Thatcherite centralisation, many might be tempted to regard the nineteenth century city with some nostalgia. Yet, it is well to remember that the local autonomy to be focused on in the first half of the paper was the cover not merely for local control, local "democracy" and local policy decisions about action and reform, but also for inaction, neglect, parsimony and the protection of vested interest - often in the face of social problems of the direst sort.

Thirdly, it should be noted that, to all that will be said particularly in the first half of the paper, there was one exception - London, the largest city of all. It was never trusted by the national elite, particularly the Conservative section: London was always seen as a potential haven of instability, danger, mass violence, rival authority and most recently radical Liberalism. Thus, it was never given any sort of overall governing authority until the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1866, and nothing that it was permitted to elect until 1889. Even then, the London County Council was granted fewer powers than most municipal boroughs and, within two years, found itself faced with a network of borough councils, established with the deliberate intention that they should compete with it for authority.¹ In this sense, the Thatcher Government's attack on, and abolition of, the Greater London Council was part of a long-established pattern of Conservative behaviour - and the exercise of comparing London government in 1900 with its future and past would produce a far less variegated picture than the one we are about to compose in focusing on provincial towns and cities.

* * * * *

Let us start by looking backwards from the present. If we do so, the most significant feature that we perceive about urban life in 1900 is local autonomy. This multi-faceted phenomenon is evident in an interconnected variety of governmental/political, social and economic ways.

Most directly significant from our current standpoint is the fact that urban local authorities - particularly the rather large number of supposedly "large" towns who were granted county borough status in 1888 - had far greater freedom to act or not to act, and to do so over a far greater range of policy-areas, that has been true since around 1918, still more since 1979. Whilst some obligations were being thrust upon local authorities from the 1840s (in the case of poor relief from at least 1834)², and whilst the rate of obligatory increment was certainly increasing from the 1880s, the large majority of municipal powers in 1900 were still the result of local initiative.

These had been acquired in any of three overlapping ways. Firstly, many were improvement powers - the result of a

successful application by the local authority concerned to apply to Parliament for an improvement Bill, passed by private Bill procedure and applying to the area of that authority alone. Subject to the deeply hazardous vagaries of the private Bill committees of the House of Commons and Lords,³ municipalities could acquire authority in a very wide range of areas by this means - from nuisance powers to the building of sewage and gas works and the laying out of parks, from compulsory purchase to extended borrowing powers. Local councils could even embody large chunks of national legislation (and here we begin to get the sense of overlap) within their improvements Acts - and thus escape much of the central supervision that went with that legislation had it been embraced directly.

Secondly, local authorities could acquire powers by adopting the permissive sections of national legislation. Many service functions could be acquired in this way - in relation, for example, to lodging, - and later, council housing, libraries and public baths. Thirdly, and overlapping with the second, there were the provisional and permanent orders of the Local Government Board - covering, so it was claimed by their champions, most of the powers available under local improvement legislation, and granted after a local enquiry by Board officials. Many permissive powers could also be acquired in the same way.

The procedures, expense and chances of successful outcome varied according to the method chosen - the improvement channel being the most expensive and most hazardous. However, the key fact from the standpoint of our present concerns is that all depended for their acquisition and content very heavily upon local initiative.

What was true of local authority functions was also still true of finance. Councils (and indeed Boards of Poor Law Guardians) paid for what they did primarily out of money raised locally - via local mortgages and stocks, profits from the utilities, and most important of all present and future rates (ie using what this property tax yielded each year, and borrowing on the strength of what future generations of ratepayers could be expected to repay). Grants-in-aid and assigned revenues from central government were increasing as we shall see (rapidly so after 1900). Nevertheless, until shortly before the First World War, governments of both parties were traditionally very keen to retain, as far as possible, the separation between national and local taxation, and reluctant to admit local authorities to a share of nationally raised revenue - if only from a pre-Thatcherite fear of the expensive and morally degrading consequences of shattering the local sense of responsibility for what was done and spent locally. Governments were equally reluctant to redistribute tax revenues to those areas whose social and sanitary problems were most intense.

It was true, as we shall see in the second half of the paper, that the centre (in the form of the Board of Education, the Board of Trade and especially the Local Government Board) was

becoming increasingly important as a source of powers, pressure and finance. Nevertheless, as most historians⁴ of central-local relations (and indeed contemporary critics) have pointed out, the centre - particularly outside of the field of poor relief - had only limited powers of supervision, and still more limited ones of compulsion and default. Moreover, as Christine Bellamy⁵ has noted the centre in the form of the Local Government Board was reluctant to exercise even those powers that it did possess.

This was so for at least two reasons. In the first place, Board officials were tentative and able to exercise only limited authority in urban areas because they were drawn pre-eminently from the families of minor landed gentry. They were often highly capable and professionally trained, but their's nevertheless were patronage posts - and the Board was one of the rather large number of bits of government where, in spite of open competitive civil service entry exams, the landed classes were still able to control recruitment until the 1890s at least.

Secondly, and more important, there was the Board's own attitude to its role - and here we came to one of the most crucial differences with contemporary Britain. As Bellamy has pointed out, it was deeply reluctant to compel, and saw its role in relation to the localities in diplomatic and political, rather than compulsory or technocratic, terms. It sought to negotiate, cajole, encourage, educate and persuade rather than to force local areas to do anything. What it mainly tried to do was to act as an arbiter between local authorities wanting to act and local interests, especially propertied ones, who saw themselves as likely to be damaged. Bellamy even argues that, due to their philosophical attachment to "possessive individualism", the Board's officials were partial arbiters, the defenders of local possessive interests against municipal government. The case can be exaggerated and, as we shall argue later, in its baldest version, misses the contrast between the Board's pattern of behaviour and that of its predecessors. Nevertheless, the case has much to commend it, particularly as a description of its reactions to protest against local authority plans to impinge on the hinterland beyond municipal borders in search of water, sewage facilities and the like. Certainly, the argument clearly points to the fact that a lot of the Board's interventions in a lot of areas were made not so much on behalf of the centre against recalcitrant municipalities, as on behalf of local interests against ambitiously active local authorities. It also helps explain why very little of the Board's compulsion was directed at service-provision. Here, it was prepared only to encourage and cajole.

Furthermore, even if we deem this judgement to be exaggerated, there is no doubt that much of the role of the Local Government Board was not of an initiating sort: rather it reacted to local authority requests for provisional and permanent orders and to parliamentary requests for aid in the vetting of local improvement Bills. This meant that central government policy in relation to local areas tended to build up like an esoteric sort of compost heap, on a case by case basis. The Board's role

certainly expanded steadily, but, in the modern jargon, reactively rather than pro-actively.

The role of central government in relation to the localities then, even as late as 1900, was one of reticence and fussiness rather than of active leadership; still less was there any sign of the sort of resentful centralization that has come to characterise government attitudes towards local authorities since 1979. This had at least two consequences - both of them rather paradoxical - for the character of local autonomy as it was evident in 1900. Firstly, such autonomy had both negative and positive sides - and both need to be emphasised when contemplated from 1991. There was great scope for initiative and creativity by actively minded local authorities. They could take and exercise a great variety of powers. Moreover, although in some ways local councils exercised a narrower range of functions than they do now (for example in the field of housing), in other respects those functions were actually more impressive. Indeed they had some powers that local authorities do not possess at all in 1991 - indeed which have ceased altogether to lie within the purview of any section of British government. Many ran their own gas, water, electricity and transport undertakings and - so far as the first two services are concerned - began to do so as early as 1830. Yet, alongside the scope for positive municipal intervention, central government reticence left more supine authorities free in many areas to neglect, ignore and retrench.

Secondly, the sort of local autonomy described here entailed considerable scope for municipal initiative and resistance against central government. Yet, it also offered local interests of many sorts - particularly those outside borough boundaries - great opportunities to resist reforming impositions by local government.

* * * * *

Thus far we have viewed local autonomy mainly as a product of the attitudes and weakness of the centre. However, we should also note that it sprang equally from the whole nature of local urban politics and society - as it still remained as late as the turn of the century.

For a start, local autonomy was strongly reinforced by the character of the local party political battle. In the vast majority of towns and cities, political parties (the Liberals and Conservatives, together with a slowly growing sprinkling of Labour and socialist organisations) dominated the recruitment and electoral processes of local government. They nominated and elected the vast majority of candidates to municipal councils, boards of guardians and - in a more indirect and complex way⁶ - education boards. However, parties were far less influential so far as the internal policy processes of councils and poor law guardians were concerned, and less influential still on the

business of electoral policy presentation. Still more importantly, national parties and their ideologies - though distinct enough in general elections - never determined what partisans did and said in the municipal arena.

There were admittedly some towns where the 'party caucus' dominated most council decisions and divisions. Bolton in Lancashire was one such place in the nineteenth century; Birmingham from the late seventies was another; so too was Leeds in the 1890s. Most places, however, were like Salford where councillors believed that, no matter how hard local elections might be fought-

The proper duty of the councillor was to drop his politics before he entered the chamber and leave them outside in (the town hall) square to dry; when he got outside he was at perfect liberty to don them again.⁷

One of the most important reasons is that party competition - even at its most intense - rarely produced town-wide, or city-wide programmes. Rival candidates in individual wards might make competing pledges to their prospective constituents, but these were rarely given on a party-wide basis - and thus committed the resultant council majority to nothing.

Municipal party programmes were admittedly emerging - for example in Birmingham and Leeds in the late century⁸ and in London from 1889 onwards.⁹ Indeed, throughout the century, there are examples of rival parties and their candidates lining up along the activist - retrenchment policy divide. Commitment to a programme was also a key part of what late-century municipal socialists stood for - and these latter were a crucial force pushing the other parties into programmatic commitment in the longer term.

In the shorter term, however, such examples were exceptions - and the key point is that, apart possibly from London, and before 1918, there were no real links between national and local policy-stances in the case of either party. What underlay this was the fact that party ideology - though it increasingly determined rival postures in general elections - gave virtually no guide about what stance either party should take up locally.¹⁰ Even if candidates did line up along different sides of the divide about municipal policy, either party in any given place could become activist and either minimalist. In late nineteenth century Birmingham, the activists were the Chamberlainite Liberals (and they significantly captured power from a group of Liberal 'economist' councillors) and in Leeds they were the Conservatives. In the last resort, party stances were mostly adopted from localised calculations of electoral advantage.

What all this means is that parties before 1914 did not and could not act - as they have come to do since 1918 - as nationalising forces in a policy sense. There was no way in

which they could cause the local authorities which they controlled to line up behind national government policy when their party was in charge - even assuming that the national government had such a policy. Nor even was there any way the parties could produce any sort of uniformity of policy issues and choices from one town to another. In so far as these existed, they primarily did so because of forces other than party.

* * * * *

Local autonomy was also reinforced - and most fundamentally so - by the whole nature of local society. There were several interrelated factors operating here. For one thing, in any given region, although nationalising trends were accelerating, local social structure in any given region was still thoroughly distinctive in many respects. Since the publication of Asa Briggs' Chartist Studies in 1959, social and urban historians have got used to the idea that the character, and more particularly the weakness of mass movements could be explained by reference to very strong differences in social and economic structure from one region to another - even from one town to another in the same region. However, it is only relatively recently that we have begun to think about late 19th century movements in the same way. For a long time, for example, we assumed that differing interpretations of the health of the Liberal Party between historians working on different parts of the country were a sign that one side or the other was wrong in the great debate about whether the party was doomed by 1914. More recently, we have begun to think that we might really be observing quite genuine differences in the success of local Liberalism in coping with social change - differences which partly rested in turn on genuine variations in class relations and rates of social change.¹¹ More recently still, the same claim about social variegation has been made in relation to the patchy fortunes and cautious pragmatism of the early Labour Party and its forerunners.¹²

We should also note that some of the nationalising trends that are so strongly evident in our society were still in their early stages of development at the end of the nineteenth century. Television and radio were absent. The mass circulation national press was very much a creation of the late eighties and early nineties - at their very earliest (The Daily Mail commenced publication in 1893). The national quality press was certainly emerging. Nevertheless, the newspapers of the nineties in many respects were still predominantly centred either on London or the provincial cities. They certainly had come to penetrate far beyond their point of publication; all the same, their main catchment area was still the region around the city in which they were produced. Aside from these, the predominant form of news publication was the local weekly press. In these decades, it was going through a golden age in terms both of circulation and verbosity - reporting at huge length on everything parochial that

moved and much that did not. Most towns of 70,000 or more could support two or even three such newspapers. This general sense of localism was true even of the socialist and Labour press. Papers with strong national pretensions - like the Clarion, Justice and the Labour Leader - were certainly in vibrant existence. Yet these had their being alongside a huge host of highly localised brother and sister papers whose primary job it was to describe the radical activities of their immediate local worlds,¹³ and to give meaning to the socialist message within those often distinctive contexts.

Both of the foregoing points are related in turn to the more general fact that, outside of London, most cities and certainly most towns still possessed a vibrant, and popularly absorbing local arena. These were still quite intensely inward-looking places in which local events of all kinds and local elites attracted enormous attention in the weekly press and amongst the local population. Thus turnouts in contested council elections were generally above 70% and regularly hit 80% or even 90%. The campaigns associated with them were still reported at inordinate length, and most local election meetings were crowded and often excited. The same was even more true of many local events. When the immensely ornate tower of Rochdale town hall burned to the ground late one night in 1883 (not a moment too soon since it had both dry rot and woodworm), a crowd of many thousands gathered to watch. At the moment when St George and the Dragon fell from the spire to land in a twisted golden heap on top of the six angels and their trumpets who had just made the same regrettable downward journey, many people were discovered to be weeping¹⁴

This was a lachrymose tribute to the civic pride that many people in many such towns still felt. This pride was evident other ways also. It is interesting that, even in a city as large and as rapidly expanding as late nineteenth century Birmingham, it was still possible to tempt large numbers of substantial businessmen on to the council with the argument that towns were like living organisms - whose parts were inter-dependent and in which the higher owed a duty of service to the lower¹⁵

They, like other present and prospective social leaders in other places, were also tempted by the prospect of increased local visibility. The doings of councillors and other local figures were still reported at immense length in the local press - and with the continuing sense that readers only required the names of the great and the graceful for instant recognition to dawn. This popular visibility was reinforced at the end of the century by the ostentatious philanthropy and hospitality of the mayor in many towns. His name invariably headed the list of donors to good causes and - in what had become known as "the gilded age" - the normally rich incumbent was the centre of an enormous round of showy hospitality at the town hall, drawing in all sections of the community to the adoring attention of the press. Partly as a result, mayoral ceremonies - like the annual procession to church - could still attract great crowds. Yet the

events that really typified and reinforced the still captivating nature of the local arena in many towns (though less so by now in cities) were the funerals of rich and prominent members of the elite. When such men died, a procession containing the carriages of many fellow social leaders would form up. Greeted by drawn blinds, closed shops and silent crowds, this would perambulate slowly about the main streets before reluctantly yielding its burden into the family vault at the cemetery.

The continually inward-looking character of many towns at this time, together with the still relatively autonomous character of local government, conditioned much that happened in municipal politics. Three things in particular stand out. Firstly, they mean that the progress or otherwise - in political agenda and policy terms - of several of the key social problems that were emerging as issues at this time was heavily dependent on the presence or absence of dynamic local personalities drawn from the elite. In the towns that I have become most familiar with, Rochdale and Bolton, this was very evident with smoke pollution and housing. These issues emerged and progressed when prominent social leaders took them up, and subsided again when those leaders dropped them or died. Not all issues were like this - some were kept going by a self-reinforcing process of popular agitation - but it is symptomatic of the sort of places these towns were that several of the most socially painful problems were of this type. It is also interesting that, at least in the area of smoke pollution, whatever clout the reformers managed to acquire derived not from the minuscule fines levied by unwilling magistrates but from the public shaming locally that manufacturers seemed to feel prosecutions brought upon them. They also derived from force of local example: major local manufacturing figures adopted smoke control technology; were given substantial local publicity and others then followed suit.

Secondly, as will already have emerged in passing, local government was still a sufficiently worthwhile environment to invite the participation of many local businessmen - some of them very substantial ones. After all, it still exercised fairly autonomous control over much that directly affected their marginal costs and other interests - in regard to smoke and river pollution, gas and water supplies, building regulation, and the levels of what was then the predominant form of direct taxation, the rates. Local government was also still a viable environment for business leaders who wanted to shine as reformers, to leave some distinctive mark upon their communities. Finally, local government and the arena in which it stood was still a viable environment for those who simply wanted to shine - to reaffirm, strengthen or indeed create a social position for themselves.

Thirdly, this arena forms a crucial and historically distinctive part of the explanation for the rapidly emerging role of the paid municipal officer. Persons such as the borough engineer, gas manager, borough treasurer, medical officer of health and above all, the town clerk, had been becoming increasingly influential figures in the making of policy since

around the 1860s. Their power rested in part upon their expertise in increasingly complex and technical areas. Yet it also rested upon their ability to rival local councillors as prominent and dignified figures in the local community. The prospect that the Journal of Gas Lighting held out to its managerial readers was attainable by any of the key municipal officials:

the manager of the long-past yesterday who entered upon his duties unknown...(is) now not only the trustworthy friend and adviser at the gas works but a highly respected citizen of the town.¹⁶

This relative social and political autonomy was reinforced, and in many respects underpinned, by economic structures. In industrial and commercial terms, the basic economic unit was still regional even at its most extended - and was often still a very personal concern. Limited companies were more or less universal in the cotton industry, for example, by 1900. Yet most of these were family concerns in thin disguise - firms in which the great bulk of the shares were owned by the family of the founding entrepreneur or that of his successors. They were often also concerns in which at least some family members were still actively involved in management. Furthermore, although the company might own several factories, its operations rarely extended beyond the borders of two or three towns. Meanwhile, on the evidence at least of Bolton and Rochdale, even the purpose-created limited companies - though certainly more impersonal - were not particularly extensive, and often had a prominent local economic leader as their leading light.

Some of the retail sector showed more development - and national chains like Liptons and Boots were clearly emerging by 1900. Yet, so far as the citizenry of most towns were concerned, at least in Northern England, the most visible chain shops they were likely to use were the multiplying branches of the local coop. These might cause local shopkeepers to become depressed in every sense. Nevertheless, they were strictly local concerns, and their operations rarely extended more than a few miles beyond the borders of their home base. The same point might be made about at least some of the 'private' retail chains. In Rochdale, the only serious rival to the coop on any retail front was "Jimmy Ducks" - the proliferating provision stores of James Duckworth & Co. By 1900, this company owned around forty shops, but they were nearly all confined to Rochdale, its out-districts and two or three of the towns nearby. Duckworth himself - in the most sacred traditions of the substantial local entrepreneur - was a prominent member of the local council for over thirty years (dying in 1917), and an equally visible social and philanthropic leader. His annual "mothers' outings" in specially chartered trains to Blackpool attracted thousands, and vied in their public splendour with the excursions organised by the coop.

* * * * *

What we have been saying then is that British local government, outside at least of London, still showed high levels of autonomy so far as the centre was concerned. However, we are also saying that this autonomy rested upon corresponding features in party political, social and economic life. It was these features which made the local governmental base so eminently defensible against impingements from the reluctant centre - and so extremely distinguishable from the Thatcherite present.

However, we have so far only been viewing urban areas in 1900 from the standpoint of our own world. A rather different picture emerges if we now turn to look at them in relation to their past - and try to see where they had been and how far they had travelled. For the late nineteenth, and early twentieth century was a period of accelerating political, social and economic change. Factors were already strongly in operation which were producing significant changes in urban life, and which - with the help of the expectation-raising and dislocating effects of the First World War, and of the communications revolution that accelerated sharply in the 1920s - would soon begin to transform that life on all fronts.

Yet, before we examine some of these factors, we need first to note that local autonomy, local control and local visibility had never been total - in either a governmental/political, a social or an economic sense.

For a start, for all its local autonomy, Britain was in no sense a federal state. The powers - and indeed the very existence - of local authorities in the last resort were derived from Parliament. This was emphasised by the fact that the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act had very few powers to give the councils either that it brought automatically into existence, or whose towns subsequently applied to become incorporated under its terms. These powers had to be acquired - mainly by local improvement Acts. This meant that there was always a supreme legislative body that was prepared to vet and to veto the functions and borrowing powers that local authorities desired; a body, moreover that was prepared to act, sometimes capriciously and often destructively, as a vigorous final arbiter in cases where proposed clauses were opposed by interests who saw themselves threatened. As a result, taking an improvement Bill before Parliament was always a costly and hazardous process in which a local authority might well lose all - if the expensive lawyers failed to present its case properly, or if the private Bill committee of the Commons or Lords decided to show its aristocratic dislike of urban places. These hazards imposed strong constraints upon even the most self-confident municipal council - causing it to shy away from inserting clauses that were guaranteed to arouse opposition, and forcing it to negotiate with local interests about many that it did insert. In the weeks before a Bill hit Westminster, councils might well carry negotiations to a point where they severely weakened crucial

clauses - or even removed them altogether - in order to prevent opposition being carried into the hazardous cock-pit of the parliamentary committee. The overall constraints were graphically described by one businessmen-turned-councillor as early as 1854:

people who might think they were very important in Bolton found themselves very little boys when in London...and had to deal with such men as Lord Redesdale, and they could not get all they would like.¹⁷

This begins to suggest that what had happened by 1900 is not just that there was more central supervision (as indeed there certainly was) but also that the main locus of supervision had changed from parliament to government - and thus had become somewhat less political and more bureaucratic. As we shall see, this was undoubtedly true. However, what we should also note is that, for all the reticence that we noted earlier, central government had been prepared to impose some very significant limits on local areas from an early stage.

There had been some compulsory powers even quite early on - in areas like policing, disease prevention etc. However, far more important in this respect was the New Poor Law of 1834, and to a lesser extent the 1870 Education Act. The former aimed to set up a complete network of uniform special authorities - the boards of guardians - whose duty it was to look after, and more importantly, control, the indigent poor within their new and centrally defined areas ("poor law unions"). They were to do so along closely prescribed and strictly deterrent lines - and were to be primarily responsive to directives from central government. In practice, boards of guardians came to operate far more autonomously than this. Nevertheless, the extensive ambition for central control is significant. So too, thinking of Thatcherite Britain, was the underlying aim of the New Poor Law. Power was to be centralised, and poor relief standardised along ferociously deterrent lines, with the ultimate intention of restoring the independence of the poor and driving them back on to the labour market. The free market was thus to be put back in place by taking power away from the old parish authorities whose lax relief practices had supposedly undermined that market and centralising it in London. All of which suggests that laissez-faire can have some very authoritarian and centralizing implications.

The long term limits on local autonomy were also observable in socio-economic terms. Areas like south-east Lancashire were regions in a real sense. Particularly with the coming of the railway, they came to consist of towns often specialising in one branch of the key regional industry and thus dependent for their well-being on that of other branches elsewhere. Such towns also increasingly focused themselves on the trading and consumer-servicing role of major regional centres like Leeds and Manchester. One consequence of this was to be found in Rochdale where it was reported indignantly in 1868 that

"the wealthier of the middle class seem to regard the shopkeeper as not good enough and cannot be persuaded of the worth or cheapness of anything unless it has been purchased in Manchester".¹⁸ A further result was that some of the most substantial entrepreneurs might well be based - economically, socially and politically - in two places: the town where their factories were located and the regional centre. Thus the Manchester or the Leeds upper middle class, for example, always constituted a group far wider than the manufacturers or merchants who actually lived in those cities. This general trend was reinforced by the nature of upper middle class families: whilst individual entrepreneurs were normally located in one town, brothers and cousins might well be found running separate enterprises elsewhere. Such regional linkages at this social level were further strengthened by complexities of marriage.¹⁹

* * * * *

In these and other senses then, there had always been marked limits to urban self-containment in a governmental, social and economic sense. What happened from around the 1880s, however, was that the underpinnings of local autonomy began to erode in an accelerating and interdependent way. Many of the central facets of locality remained substantially in place until 1914, but they had been very significantly undermined.

As will already have emerged in passing in the first section of this paper, change was certainly becoming evident at the level of government. The role of the centre was increasing. The Local Government Board, as we have seen was a very inhibited body. Nevertheless, it did represent a considerable centralisation of power over what had gone before. Pro-active it was not, but it was prepared to be considerably less passive than its predecessor, the Local Government Act Office.²⁰ It was also a lot more fussy, prepared - at the very least - to constantly nag local authorities that persistently failed to carry out their obligations in areas like sanitation and disease-prevention. Ultimately, however slowly, this tended to produce action. This fussiness, together with its ability to deny borrowing powers to the obstinate and its willingness to produce bodies of 'model regulations', also meant that the Board had an important role as a unifier and standardiser of sanitary, building and other powers, and of things like methods of sewage disposal, from one town to another. This was mainly through its ability to grant or deny Permanent and Provisional Orders, but also through being called in by parliamentary private Bill committees during their consideration of particular pieces of improvement legislation. The result was that, though by 1900 there were still considerable variations in the level of sanitary and other activity between different local authorities, those councils who were active in particular areas were increasingly likely to be so in fairly uniform ways and on increasingly standardised financial terms.

It is worth noting in passing that, in some ways, the emergence of the Local Government Board greatly strengthened local authority elites - not in their dealings with the centre but in relation to groups within municipal boundaries who might wish to oppose what they wanted to do. Applying for a Local Government Board Provisional or Permanent Order was far cheaper than applying for an improvement Bill - and one could obtain most of the same powers. Because the criteria by which the Board's inspectors judged applications for Orders were bureaucratic and legalistic rather than political the process was also far more predictable. Christine Bellamy²¹ may be right in arguing that the local enquiries that the Board conducted when investigating applications tended to be somewhat protective of local possessive interests who claimed likely injury if local authority proposals were granted. Nevertheless, the Board's inspectors were far less susceptible to such squeals of propertied pain than were the members of parliamentary private Bill committees.

All the same, the growing visibility of the Local Government Board certainly decreased local autonomy vis à vis the centre. It is also evident that local leaders complained more about central intervention than they had done previously - and, at the least, saw the centre as an increasingly formidable nuisance. The following cry from the heart by a Rochdale councillor in relation to plans for a TB sanatorium in 1913 is typical of many others:

The (health) committee were absolutely in the hands of the (Lancashire) County Council and the Local Government Board and could not stir a step until those bodies gave them permission to go on. (The Board) had made some alterations in the plans of the dispensary, and would not let the corporation have any contribution towards it unless they accepted those alterations.

His colleagues wondered whether "very strong language" might get things moving, but concluded sadly that it would not.²²

Far more significant changes were emerging at the level of finance - in particular in the subsidies given to local authorities - and here the acceleration around the turn of the century is very significant indeed. In 1868, exchequer grants amounted to around £0.8m; by 1880 they had reached £2.7m; by 1890 £6.5m; by 1900 £12.2m and by 1910 £20.0m.²³

Unfortunately, these rising subsidies did not nearly keep pace with the increase in local authority expenditure. As a result, local rates were rising rapidly in the years leading up to 1914. This was due to the continuing reluctance on the part of central government to break down the traditional separation between central and local sources of finance that we mentioned earlier - allied to the increasing duties that were being laid upon local authorities. In the short term this

pointed to the continuing attachment to local financial autonomy on the part of the centre. However, in the longer term, it was likely to severely undermine that autonomy - both by making it far harder for councils to remain financially viable and by the pain that it caused particularly amongst the lower middle class ratepayer, the group traditionally most attached to local government and local control. The rise in rates, plus increasingly stringent building regulations, was also helping create the beginnings of a crisis in the private housing market that - in the wake of the First World War - was going to bring government (local government strongly pressed from the centre) into the business of housing supply in a major way.²⁴

All of this was making it steadily harder to think of towns and cities as "little republics" and "little empires" in the way that local leaders had happily been able to do until around the 1880s - if for no other reason than the fact that the means of financial self-support were eroding in major ways.

This was doubly so because local autonomy was also unravelling in party political and electoral terms. To begin with, though parties were not acting as centralising forces for the government of the day in the way they do now, they were themselves in the process organisationally of becoming far more centralised. The trend had been evident since the 1867 Franchise Reform Act - and the consequent emergence of large numbers of working class male electors. However, it was greatly accelerated (in both parties) by the emergence of the National Liberal Federation in the late 1870s. As a result, though the sources of finance in general elections were still primarily local, the constituency organisations of these emerging mass parties were becoming markedly more responsive to party headquarters in terms of parliamentary candidate selection, and in the way they fought their campaigns, than had ever been true before.

For reasons already covered, this had no immediate direct impact on local elections. However, it did have a strong indirect effect, particularly over the medium term. It meant that general elections increasingly came to be swayed by a proliferating range of national issues, and equally important by the personalities of the leading national figures on both sides, particularly the two party leaders. In the 1860s, it was still possible for a prime minister to wonder why large crowds had gathered at a provincial railway station when he arrived.²⁵ By the 1880s, still more by 1900, large crowds caused wonderment only when they failed to appear.

What this did in turn was to strongly reinforce a trend that had been evident since at least the early 1870s - whereby council elections were increasingly coming to be influenced by popular opinions about the performance of the party in charge of national government. In a sense, this trend may even have been further strengthened by the very absence of differentiation between the parties about local issues - and by the frequent inconsequence of which party won locally in terms of the character of municipal action. However, whatever the reason,

local elections when they took place increasingly tended to record a uniform shift across the country or region in the direction of one party or the other - particularly around general election times.

These political and governmental trends were reinforced by - and themselves reinforced - important social and economic changes. For one thing, local social and economic leaders - particularly the younger ones - were trickling away from local social and economic life, and from the local urban scene generally. Those that remained, as we have seen, were still prominent; and to some degree the place of wealthy manufacturers and merchants was being taken by wealthy shopocrats and professionals. Sometimes, as in Birmingham and Leeds, there might even be a late resurgence of economic leaders into the council. However, in general the trend was emphatically downwards - and it was becoming steadily harder to find men of property and substance willing to stand. This was a trend that was much commented upon at the time, especially by the increasingly aged social and economic leaders who remained. In 1891, Salford's mayor mournfully admitted that "the great bulk of wealthy merchants and capitalists and manufacturers, who came to Salford to earn their money, retired to Alderley Edge, Eccles and Higher Broughton there to enjoy an inglorious ease."²⁶ Eighteen years later, another mayor of the same city pronounced it "a very great loss to their country that the class of men who lived amongst the people fifty years ago took an interest in their lives and helped them in various ways - that they should have gone to live in the country."²⁷

Some were retreating into political quiescence. Rather more were retreating into the far out suburbs, the seaside and to London. Whatever the reason, their withdrawal served to erode one of the important bases of local autonomy - the presence of popularly absorbing personalities on the local scene. Their removal took away a major reason for people to look inwards; it also began to socially decapitate the local "community".

This was particularly so because it was linked to other social and economic changes that were pressing in the same direction. In part, it was one of the consequences of the development of the limited company. We have seen that this development did not wholly break the link between large employers and the towns where their works were located, in quite the simple way earlier historians had assumed, because so many companies remained family concerns. Certainly, few of these companies were the sort of massive and impersonal economic entities that were to emerge in later decades. Nevertheless, the link that a family owning several factories was likely to have with its employees, and the town(s) in which they lived, was less personal than that which had earlier sprung up with an entrepreneur owning one or two. This was doubly so because the development coincided with the final emergence of professionally trained management - making it possible for the chief shareholders to withdraw, at least partially, from direct involvement if they wished. Company owners who were detached in this way and whose productive units,

moreover, were spread over more than one town, were less likely to feel that their fate was so directly linked with any one urban area in quite the way their predecessors had done in the 1860s.

The steady withdrawal of economic and social leaders was also part of a more general shift of middle class, particularly upper middle class, political interest and attention away from the locality towards the centre. In spite of the Franchise Reform Act of 1832, urban middle class leaders were substantially shut out of parliament due to the fact that the electoral system remained heavily weighted in favour of the rural and small town areas of the country. In a laissez-faire state, they also did not greatly feel the need to intervene very directly in the doings of national government. What they mainly needed was to be left alone - and this a predominantly aristocratic parliament and government was broadly happy to do so far as most areas of economic activity were concerned. Local government and the local arena, meanwhile, fulfilled most needs of business leaders - to protect their interests, to gain public esteem and to make a reforming mark.²⁸ However, from around the 1880s, all this became markedly less true. With the Franchise and Redistribution Act of 1883, parliament was opened up. Government moved, or threatened to move, into more economic, commercial and social service fields - and thus became worthy of more direct attention. The local arena began to lose some of its charms.

We return to this last point because it also links to another phenomenon that was undermining locality in more serious and more multiple ways - that of suburbanisation and urban infill. This was a general and accelerating development in the decades around the turn of the century. In the censuses after 1881, the communities showing the highest levels of population growth were invariably suburbs. Apart from drawing many sections of the middle class away from residence and participation in urban localities, this development also began increasingly to erode the whole basis and possibility of local control, local autonomy and the urban community as it had traditionally existed in earlier decades of the 19th century.

It did this in multiple ways. Amongst other things, it broke the link for many people between the location of their residence, their work and their leisure. In Rochdale and Bolton, factories increasingly located themselves just beyond municipal boundaries, thus allowing them access to the assembled workforce without their owners having to be burdened with the rates that helped maintain it in reasonable health, and paid for the roads and transport on which it travelled. The location of these and other factories somewhat further away meant that many living in town left it in order to work. Others, living in townships outside, came in to find employment. Still others came in only to shop. Still others did none of these, merely depositing their bodily emanations into the pipes which their district authorities had thoughtfully hitched up the sewage systems of the towns near which they were located.

All of this began strongly to reinforce the interdependence that had already begun to exist between urban locations - between town and suburb, between town and 'out-district' and between town and town. The problem was that no very effective local, or indeed central, governmental mechanisms were being produced to cope with the consequences.

Thus, in many town councils, there came to be a mood of increasing resentment of outsiders - people living beyond municipal boundaries who used local authority and other urban services (in terms of roads, baths, parks, transport, sewage systems, water supplies etc); who contributed to urban problems (in terms of smoke and river pollution etc), but who almost wholly failed to pay for their upkeep or development or alleviation. These outsiders paid fares and fees but no rates - and ferociously resisted all attempts at municipal absorption.

This helped lead to a situation in which more and more urban problems and issues involved groups and authorities outside - in terms both of cause and amelioration - and became more difficult to resolve as a result. This obviously applied in areas like smoke and river pollution. However, it was also evident in relation to problems that appeared more purely internal. The debates in urban councils around the turn of the century suggest that many of their members felt, for example, that if they tried to ameliorate insanitary housing by increasing the stringency of municipal building regulations, they faced a growing likelihood of housing being constructed in the out-districts where regulations were laxer.

More and more problems could also only be resolved by obtaining cooperation and consent from people and authorities over whom municipal elites had little leverage. Thus they could only resolve the rising demands of their populations for water by seeking resources in areas well beyond municipal boundaries thereby competing with other local authorities on similar errands. They could only satisfy the increasing needs of populations within and beyond their boundaries for outward and inward transport by cooperating with other potential transport authorities and gaining consents from populations over whose territory the transport links were to run. They could only find places to deposit and process their sewage by acquiring similar consents - and indeed making similar bargains over access. Such need for negotiation had never been absent - particularly in areas like sewage and water. However - due to rising expectations and spreading urbanisation - such needs multiplied.

The problem was that, precisely because of central government's continuing reluctance to interfere with local and autonomy and property rights, it provided only rather inadequate means of resolving such difficulties and achieving such coordination. Outside of the crucial field of river pollution, no coordinating authorities were set up. Local enquiries about applications for provisional orders provided a useful and reasonably well-regulated forum for the negotiation of internal disputes. However, they proved altogether less adequate, as we

have seen, as means of resolving disputes with outsiders. The problems were greatly accentuated by the fact that many of the problems of local authorities in central urban places could only be finally resolved by boundary extension. However, in this area above all, the Local Government Board proved reluctant to permit incorporation without the enthusiastic consent of the areas to be thus absorbed. The circumstances of most of these areas made it highly unlikely that such enthusiasm would be forthcoming.

* * * * *

In conclusion, it is clear that local autonomy remained a vibrant force at the turn of the century - particularly when compared with the highly centralised world that we now know. Highly important in governmental terms, it was also underpinned by crucial features of the party political, social and economic environment. Yet it is also clear that, compared with its past, some of that governmental autonomy and rather more of its social and economic underpinning was coming unravelling, and doing so at an accelerating rate. Moreover, the lesson of the most recent pages of this paper may be that the continuing vibrancy of the attachment to local control was itself beginning to create severe problems - as, in the wake of accelerating urbanisation, different autonomies came into increasingly irresolvable conflict.

Endnotes

1. See Ken Young and Pat Garside, Metropolitan London: Politics and Urban Change 1837-1981, (London 1982).
2. Here (under the Poor Law Amendment Act) special ad hoc authorities - the Boards of Guardians - were set up to administer poor relief.
3. See John Garrard, Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns: Bolton, Rochdale & Salford 1830-80, (Manchester 1983).
4. See, for example, H J Laski et al, A Century of Municipal Progress, (London 1935). (For essay by Ivor Jennings); K B Smellie, A Hundred Years of British Government, (London 1948); Kenneth D Brown, "John Burns at the Local Government Board", Journal of Social Policy, VI 1977, pp.157-70; R Davidson & R Lowe, "Bureaucracy and Innovation in British Welfare Policy 1870-1945, in W J Mommsen (ed), The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany, (London 1981); P J Waller, City Town and Nation 1850-1914, (Oxford 1983), ch.6; most recently and most usefully, there is Christine Bellamy, Administering Central-Local Relations 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in its Fiscal and Cultural Context, (Manchester 1988).
5. Bellamy Ibid.
6. Education Board candidates were formally nominated by the various religious sects. Nevertheless, aside from the Catholics, the real movers in the electoral game were often the two main political parties.
7. Councillor Bonsor, Salford Weekly Chronicle, 21 November 1874, p.4.
8. See E P Hennock, Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in 19th Century Urban Government, (London 1973).
9. See Young and Garside op cit; also Ken Young, Local Politics and the Rise of Party: The London Municipal Society and Conservative intervention in Local Elections 1894-1963, (Leicester 1975).
10. The sole exceptions were the politics of education boards where the polarised religious constituencies of the two parties determined attitudes towards education locally as well as nationally.
11. For examples of the variation, see P F Clark, Lancashire and the New Liberalism, (Cambridge 1971) and Paul Thompson, Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London

- 1885-1914, (London 1967). For a recent interpretation of this variation, see Keith Laybourne and Jack Reynolds, Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890-1918, (London 1984), ch.1.
12. See Ross McKibbin, "Why there was no Marxism in Britain" in English Historical Review, April 1984. See also Bill Lancaster, Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism: Leicester Working Class Politics 1860-1906, (Leicester 1987), and David Howell, British Workers and the ILP.
 13. See D Hopkin, "The Socialist Press in Britain 1890-1914" in G Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (eds), Newspaper History from the 17th Century to the Present Day, (London 1978), ch.16.
 14. Rochdale Observer, 14 April, p3f.
 15. See Hennock, op.cit, Book I, Part II.
 16. Journal of Gas Lighting, 15 February 1887, p. 302. For a fuller explanation of the world of the local official, see J Garrard, The Great Salford Gas Scandal of 1887, (British Gas North Western, Partington 1987): available from the archivist).
 17. Thomas Thomasson, Bolton Chronicle, 13 May 1854, p.6.
 18. Rochdale Observer, 15 February 1868, p.4.
 19. See R J Morris, "Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites 1780-1850" in L Davidoff & C Hall, Family Fortunes - Men and Women of the English Middle Classes, (London 1987), Patrick Joyce, Work, Society and Politics - The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England, (Brighton 1980), ch.1.
 20. See Royston Lambert, "Central and Local Relations in mid-Victorian England - The Local Government Act Office 1858-71" in Victorian Studies, December 1962.
 21. Op.cit.
 22. Councillors Shawcross and Dawson, Rochdale Observer, 5 July 1913, p.9.
 23. Figures from P J Waller, op.cit, p.264.
 24. For the "crisis" supposedly evident amongst this group and for the associated housing problems, see David Englander, Landlord and Tenant in Urban England 1838-1914, (Oxford 1982), Martin Daunt, House and Home in the Victorian City: Working Class Housing 1850-1914, (London 1983), Avner Offer, Property & Politics 1870-1914, (Cambridge 1981).

25. John Vincent, The Formation of the Liberal Party 1857-68, (Harmondsworth 1972).
26. Salford Reporter, 12 November 1891, p.6.
27. Salford Reporter, 10 November 1919, p.3.
28. See John Garrard, 'The Middle Class and 19th Century National and Local Politics', in Garrard, Jary et al (eds), The Middle Class in Politics, (Farnborough 1978), pp.35-66.